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THE LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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What is consciousness? The word is not easy to define, partly because we use it to cover a variety of meanings. We might say an awake person has consciousness, whereas some one who is asleep does not. Or, someone could be awake, but so absorbed in their thoughts that they have little consciousness of the world around them. We speak of having a political, social, or ecological consciousness. And we may say that human beings have consciousness while other creatures do not, meaning that humans think and are self-aware.

In this article, I shall be using the word consciousness not as a particular state of consciousness, or a kind of consciousness, but as the faculty of consciousness—the capacity for inner experience, whatever the nature or degree of the experience.

The faculty of consciousness can be likened to the light from a movie projector. The projector shines light onto a screen, modifying the light so as to produce any one of a multitude of images. These images are like the perceptions, sensations, dreams, memories, thoughts, and feelings that we experience—what I call the “contents of consciousness.” The light itself, without which no images would be possible, corresponds to the faculty of consciousness.

When we watch a movie, we are not aware of the light itself; our attention is caught up in the images that appear and the stories they tell. In much the same way, we are aware of the many different perceptions, thoughts and feelings that appear in the mind. But we are seldom aware of consciousness itself.

Pure Consciousness

A greater awareness of consciousness itself has been the goal of many spiritual traditions. They urge us to step back from our sensory perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories to become aware of the pure light of consciousness that lies at the heart of every experience we ever have.

This requires that our minds become still. Just as it is hard to be aware of silence in the midst of a busy environment, full of traffic noise, music, conversations, and the general clatter of life, so it is hard to be aware of the true nature of consciousness if it is overshadowed by mental chatter, thoughts about what might or might not happen next, feelings and emotions, memories, and suchlike. Through meditation, or some other practice, we need to let the incessant activity of the mind settle down, and eventually become silent.

Indian teachings call this silent state of mind samadhi (literally, "still mind"). They see it to be a fundamentally different state of consciousness from the three major states we normally experience—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. In waking consciousness we are aware of the world perceived by the senses. In dreaming we are aware of worlds conjured by the imagination. In deep sleep there is no awareness, either of outer world or inner world. In samadhi there is awareness, one is wide awake, but now there is no object of awareness. It is pure consciousness—consciousness before it takes on the various forms and qualities of a particular experience.

In the analogy with a movie projector, this fourth state of consciousness corresponds to the projector being on, but with out any film running through it, so that only white light falls on the screen. Likewise, in samadhi there is the light of pure consciousness, but nothing else. It is the faculty of consciousness without any content.

The Isha Upanishad, an ancient Indian text, says of this fourth state:

It is not outer awareness,
It is not inner awareness,
Nor is it a suspension of awareness.
It is not knowing
It is not unknowing,
Nor is it knowingness itself.
It can neither be seen nor understood,
It cannot be given boundaries.
It is ineffable and beyond thought.
It is indefinable.
It is known only through becoming it.

Similar descriptions can be found in almost every culture of the world. Here, using remarkably similar terms, is the fifth- century Christian mystic Dionysius:

It is not soul, or mind ...
It is not order or greatness or littleness ...
It is not immovable nor in motion nor at rest ...
Nor does it belong to the category of non-existence,
or to that of existence ...
Nor can any affirmation or negation apply to it.

The Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki referred to it as a "state of Absolute Emptiness":

There is no time, no space, no becoming, no thingness. Pure experience is the mind seeing itself as reflected in itself.... This is possible only when the mind is sunyata [emptiness] itself, that is, when the mind is devoid of all its possible contents except itself.

The Essence of Self

When the mind is devoid of all content, we not only find absolute serenity and peace, we also discover the true nature of the self. Usually we derive our sense of self from the various things that mark us out as individuals—our bodies and their appearance, our history, our nationality, the roles we play, our work, our social and financial status, what we own, what others think of us, and so on. We also derive an identity from the thoughts and feelings we have, from our beliefs and values, from our creative and intellectual abilities, from our character and personality. These, and many other aspects of our lives, contribute to our sense of who we are.

In addition to deriving an identity from how we experience ourselves in the world, we also derive a sense of self from the very fact that we are experiencing. If there is experience, there must, we assume, be an experiencer; there must be an "I" who is doing the experiencing. It certainly feels that way. Whatever is going on in my mind, there is this sense that I am the subject of it all.

But what exactly is this sense of "I-ness?" I use the word "I" hundreds of times a day without hesitation. I say that I am thinking or seeing something, that I have a feeling or desire, that I know or remember something. It is the most familiar, most intimate, most obvious aspect of myself. I know exactly what I mean by "I." Until, that is, I try to describe it or define it. Then I run into trouble.

Looking for the self is rather like being in a dark room with a flashlight, and then shining it around trying to find the source of the light. All I would find are the various objects in the room that the light falls upon. It is the same when I try to look for the subject of my experience. All I

find are the various ideas, images, and feelings that the attention falls upon. But these are all objects of experience; they cannot therefore be the subject of the experience.

So what is the subject of experience? What is this "I" I know so well yet cannot find? Erwin Schrodinger, one of the founders of quantum physics yet also someone with a keen interest in the mind, concludes, "You will, on close introspection, find that what you really mean by "I" is the ground-stuff upon which all experiences and memories are collected." What he is effectively saying is that our sense of "I-ness" is nothing but the feeling of consciousness itself.

Those who have tasted samadhi would agree. They claim that when the mind is silent, when all the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and memories with which we habitually identify have fallen away, then what remains is the essence of self—not a sense of "I am this" or "I am that"; but just "I am." Although even to use the word "I" can be misleading. It might be more accurate to say there is amness—the first-person experience of pure being.

This essential self has none of the uniqueness of the individual self, just the opposite—it is the same for all of us. Being beyond all attributes and identifying characteristics, your sense of I-ness is indistinguishable from mine. The light of consciousness shining in you, which you label "I," is the same light that I label "I." In this we are one. I am the light. And so are you.

The Divine Self

Most of the mystics and sages who have come to know the pure consciousness behind experience go one step further. They claim that when you know the light of consciousness shining at the core of each and every one of us, you also discover an intimate connection with God.

The twentieth-century scholar and mystic Thomas Merton put it very neatly:

If I penetrate to the depths of my own existence and my own present reality, the indefinable am that is myself in its deepest roots, then through this deep center I pass into the infinite I am which is the very Name of the Almighty.

Similar claims appear in Eastern traditions. The great Indian sage Sri Ramana Maharshi said:

"I am" is the name of God. God is none other than the Self.

In the twelfth century, Ibn-Al-Arabi, one of the most revered Sufi mystics, wrote:

If thou knowest thine own self, thou knowest God.

Shankara, the eighth-century Indian saint, whose insights revitalized Hindu teachings, said of his own enlightenment:

I am Brahman.... I dwell within all beings as the soul, the pure consciousness, the ground of all phenomena.... In the days of my ignorance, I used to think of these as being separate from myself. Now I know that I am All.

Shankara had discovered for himself the core message of the ancient Indian teachings, Atman is Brahman. Atman is one of the Sanskrit words for the self. It refers not to the sense of individual self with which we normally identify ourselves, but to pure consciousness, the beingness that lies at the core of each and every one of us. And this universal self, the teachings claim, is Brahman, the source of all.

The most direct translation in English would be "I am God." Such a statement is, however, open to much misunderstanding. To many it rings of blasphemy. God, according to conventional religion, is the supreme deity, the almighty eternal omniscient creator. How can any lowly human being claim that he or she is God?

Yet when mystics say "I am God," or words to that effect, they are not talking of an individual person. Their inner explorations have led them to an awareness of their true essential self, and it is this that they experience as Divine.

This sheds new light on the Biblical injunction, "Be still, and know that I am God." It does not mean, "Stop fidgeting around and recognize that the person who is speaking to you is the almighty God of all creation." It makes much more sense as an encouragement to still the mind, and know, not as an intellectual understanding but as a direct realization, that the "I am" that is your essential self, the pure consciousness that lies behind all experience, is God.

This concept of God is not of a separate superior being, existing in some other realm, overlooking human affairs, and loving or judging us according to our deeds. The Divine is in each and every one of us, the most intimate and undeniable aspect of ourselves. It is the light of consciousness that shines in every mind.

Like traditional concepts of God, the light of consciousness is omnipresent. Whatever your experience, whatever you are thinking, perceiving, feeling, consciousness is always there. As the saying goes, "Wherever you go, there you are."

It is eternal. What takes place in consciousness changes all the time, but the beingness behind it, like the light inside a film projector, never changes.

And it is universal. The same light shining in every sentient being.

In the words of the ninth-century Zen master, Huang Po:

This pure Mind, the source of everything,
Shines forever and on all with the brilliance of its own perfection.

But the people of the world do not awake to it,
Regarding only that which sees, hears, feels and knows as mind,
Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling and knowing,
They do not perceive the spectral brilliance of the source of all substance.

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